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### **Mental Misconceptions**

“...if we do nothing, then maybe it will get better- maybe its just a phase.” This appears to be a very common misconception in families of people with schizophrenia. Although the reality is that, if left untreated, the schizophrenic stands a greater chance of suffering permanent brain damage. Like Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s disease, schizophrenia is a disease of the brain, in which the brain is physically damaged, and unfortunately symptoms of the disease usually appear quite late. MRI scans of a schizophrenic, show a degeneration in the volume of grey matter in the brain, and recently neuroscientists have detected grey matter loss of up to 25%. Grey matter is tissue of the nervous system, thus largely found in the brain, rich in nerve cells, which transmit messages or impulses all over the body.

The word “schizophrenia” is less than one hundred years old and comes from the Greek roots, “schizo” meaning to split and “phrene” meaning mind, which is supposed to convey the fragmented thinking of people with the disorder.

Significant loss of grey matter causes severe symptoms of schizophrenia including, hallucinations, delusions, psychotic thoughts and depression. Schizophrenics may also have difficulty in expressing emotions, have slurred speech and feel suicidal. One schizophrenic commented that “the nurses and doctors were plotting to kill me.” Treatment for the disorder is largely in the form of anti-psychotic medication, but anti-depressants and mood-stabilisers are also available. Rehabilitation programs, cognitive therapy and peer support groups are also effective means of rebuilding a recovering schizophrenics self esteem and confidence.

Scientific research reveals that schizophrenia is the result of the interactions of genes, and evidence shows that identical twins, of whom share 100% of genes have a 48% risk of developing schizophrenia. A study, which began in 1990, investigating genetic influences on schizophrenia has identified particular chromosomes with an association for the disease, including a gene on chromosome number 22, that almost doubles the carriers risk of developing the disorder. Identification of genes, which are found on the chromosomes, is the first step towards possible gene therapy in order to treat sufferers.

The percentage at just under half, of all identical twins at risk of developing schizophrenia, suggests that genetics is not the only cause of the disease and must also be influenced by environmental factors. Schizophrenia-linked environmental factors include lead exposure during pregnancy, birth complications, high stress experiences as a child, and drug use as an adolescent, which all lead to subtle alterations of the brain tissue. Drugs such as cannabis are a major influence, and inner-city psychiatrists speak of cannabis being an influence on 80% of schizophrenia cases. There is also evidence to suggest that cannabis, when used whilst the brain is still in its fifteen years of development, increases the levels of the chemical dopamine in the brain, which has a direct correlation with increasing risks of schizophrenia.

Neuroscientists comment that “by avoiding all use of street-drugs, you can reduce your chance of developing schizophrenia by as much as 50% to 80%.” However, the truth is that about 70% of all schizophrenics will improve, and schizophrenia only affects a mere 1% of the population. Researchers at the NIMH\* have investigated and have evidence to believe that the reduction in grey matter of the brain may be reversible, and therefore the cognitive decline that loss of grey matter causes can be restored. Many drug companies are at present researching into this area.

Schizophrenia is a severe disorder, but our ignorance about mental illnesses means that we find them difficult to comprehend. We find ourselves accepting diseases or disorders of the brain which may also leave one mentally impaired, such as brain tumours or meningitis, but people often appear dismissive and tense towards mental illnesses. Perhaps our fear prevails us from learning more about mental health. Or do we already have an image fixated in our minds of what a “mental” person is like, which frightens us more...not “normal,” but psychotic, who’s only emotions are anger and disconcertion; sectioned in a psychiatric hospital?

Rising above our ignorance allows society to learn more about schizophrenia and in exploring the unknown, our fears change to interest and our misconceptions to understanding as future research and treatments provide reassurance and hope to those living in fear.

\*NIMH: National Institute of Mental Health